

## The Influence of Culture on the Communicative Style of Students in a Malaysian Secondary School

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### Abstract

This study investigates the influence of culture on the communicative style of students in a Malaysian school. It focuses on the relationship between cultural orientation and anxiety-uncertainty management and language usage. Data were collected from 20 Chinese and Indian students from a Malaysian secondary school through a set of questionnaire to look into the cultural orientation and to identify its influence on the students' communicative style. The results indicate that the cultural orientation among the Chinese and Indian students vary on a continuum from high individualistic orientation to high collectivistic orientation. There is an almost equal distribution of individualists and collectivists among the Chinese students while there are more collectivists among the Indian students. The relationship between cognitive (uncertainty) and affective (anxiety) factors and the two selected aspects of language (beliefs about talks and direct-indirect communication) do not reciprocate indicating that other factors like personality, individual values and self-constructs influence one's communicative style. The collectivists on the other hand also exhibit similar relationship. The results contradict with the general characteristics of the individualistic and collectivistic orientation and recent work linking it with AUM theory. Theoretical implications are discussed.

### Introduction

Communication is an important aspect of our lives. It is a process that binds us all together, helps accomplish tasks, have relationships and achieve goals. Through communication we develop, maintain and transmit culture from one generation to the next through reinforcing cultural goals and values within generations. To state differently communication and culture influence each other. The culture in which individuals are socialized into influences the way they communicate, and the way that individuals communicate influences the culture they share over time (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey & Nishida, 1996). Therefore communication plays a significant role in our understanding of cultural differences and the influence of cultural differences on communicative style.

This paper focuses on the relationship between cultural orientation and anxiety-uncertainty management and language usage. Cultural orientation influences the way individuals communicate and this style of communication can be thought of as the result or the manifestation of culture. Further, communication style also influences and reinforces cultural values. This cyclic nature of the relationship between culture and communicative style suggests that communicative style can be understood by identifying one's cultural orientation and anxiety-uncertainty management and vice versa. Due to the influence of cultural orientation on communicative style, understanding cultural orientation has important implications for understanding communicative style.

This paper is based on a study that attempts to identify the cultural orientation of some 20 Chinese and Indian students in a Malaysian secondary school. It examines the relationship between the cultural orientation, anxiety-uncertainty management and their influence on the students' language use. It begins by exploring the major cultural orientation, anxiety-uncertainty management and use of language with an emphasis on two selected aspects of communication: beliefs about talk and the use of direct and indirect communication. Specifically, the paper set out to:



- i. identify the major cultural dimension (i.e. individualists-collectivists) of the Chinese and Indian students in the school;
- ii. identify the relationship between the major cultural dimension, anxiety-uncertainty management and two selected aspects of language use of low and high context communication among the Chinese and Indian students; and
- iii. discuss how the cultural dimensions influence the two selected aspects of low and high context communication (beliefs about talk and direct indirect communication) among the Chinese and Indian students.

### Background to the Study

#### Individualism and collectivism

Individualism and collectivism have been described by Triandis et al. (1986) as constituting perhaps the most important dimension of cultural differences in social behaviour across the world's diverse cultures. Numerous cross-cultural studies (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Hui & Triandis, 1986) have provided empirical evidence supporting the usefulness of the individualism-collectivism (IC) dimension as a way of categorizing cultures. Triandis et al. (1986) posit that emphasis is usually more on people than on the task in collectivist cultures and vice versa.

According to Gudykunst (1998), IC is manifested in unique ways in each culture where there are general patterns of behaviour that are consistent in individualistic cultures and collectivistic cultures. Individualistic societies emphasize individuals' initiatives and achievement, while belonging to groups is emphasized in collectivistic societies. People in individualistic cultures tend to be universalistic and apply the same value standards to all. People in collectivistic cultures, in contrast, tend to be particularistic and, therefore apply different value standards for members of their in-groups and out-groups. As members of individualistic cultures are socialized into their culture, they learn the major values of their culture (e.g., independence, achievement) and learn preferred ways for how members of the culture are expected to view themselves as unique persons (Wiseman, 1995). Members of collectivistic cultures learn different major values (e.g., harmony, solidarity) and different preferred ways to conceive of themselves (e.g. interconnected with others) (Gudykunst et al., 1996). Having said that because individualism and collectivism exist in all cultures, people from predominantly individualistic cultures, for instance, do acquire some collectivistic values and learn interdependent self-construals (Gudykunst, 1998). Although individualistic and collectivistic tendencies exist in all cultures, one tends to predominate the other.

Wiseman in his study (1995) claims that individuals do not share all of their group memberships. Everyone the individuals meet is a potential stranger. Gudykunst (1998) uses a linking concept 'stranger' to explain communication between people from the same group and communication between people from different groups at the same time. 'Strangers' represent both the idea of nearness in that they are physically close and the idea of remoteness in that they have different values and ways of doing things. Strangers are physically present and participate in a situation and at the same time, are outside the situation because they are members of different groups (Gudykunst, 1998).

In relation to the concept of 'stranger', Herman and Schield (1961, cited in Wiseman 1995, p.10) point out that "the immediate psychological result of being in a new situation is lack of security. Ignorance of the potentialities inherent in the situation, of the means to reach a goal, and of the probable outcomes of an intended action causes insecurity". Attempts to deal with the ambiguity of new situations involve a pattern of information-seeking (uncertainty reduction) and tension (anxiety) reduction (Ball-Rokeach, 1973 cited in Gudykunst, 1998). Managing uncertainty and anxiety, therefore is a central process affecting our communication with strangers.



### Uncertainty-Anxiety Management Theory

According to Gudykunst (1998), uncertainty arises from our inability to predict or explain strangers' behaviours, attitudes, and feelings. Managing uncertainty is a cognitive process. Some degree of uncertainty exists in all relationships, but there tends to be more uncertainty when we communicate with members of different groups than when we communicate with members of our own groups. Hence, we can never totally predict or explain others' behaviours.

Anxiety is the affective (emotional) equivalent of uncertainty. We experience some degree of anxiety any time we communicate with others. Anxiety is a 'generalized or unspecific sense of disequilibrium' (Turner, 1988, p. 61). It stems from feeling uneasy, tense, worried, or apprehensive about what might happen. Anxiety is one of the fundamental problems with which all humans must cope (Lazarus, 1991) but it tends to be higher in intergroup than interpersonal encounters. The amount of diffuse anxiety we experience influences our motivation to communicate with others. If our diffuse anxiety is too high, we are not motivated to communicate. Management refers to the importance of cultivating awareness or 'mindfulness' (Langer, 1989, p. 246) in dealing with unfamiliar values and interaction scripts.

Anxiety and uncertainty exist in all cultures. The anxiety-uncertainty management (AUM) theory (Gudykunst, 1988, 1993, 1995) suggests that effective intergroup/interpersonal communication is a function of the amount of anxiety and uncertainty individuals experience when communicating with others. Cultural differences such as individualism-collectivism have been integrated into the AUM theory to explain social and personal encounters across cultures. This theory has been also used to explain both cross-cultural, intergroup and interpersonal relationship situations.

### Cultural differences in language usage

Culture and language are interrelated highly. Cultures influence the way one uses language. In this paper, the focus on cultural differences in language use would have an emphasis on selected aspects of low and high-context communication: beliefs about talk and the use of direct and indirect messages and the relationship between the cultural differences (individualism-collectivism) and low and high-context communication.

Low and high-context communication (LC and HC) is a function of individualism-collectivism (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988 cited in Gudykunst, 1988). A study by Gudykunst et al. (1986 or 1996) illustrates differences in communication styles between HC and LC cultures. Members of individualistic cultures are more affect oriented and more inclined to talk than members of collectivistic cultures (Gaetz, Klopf & Ishii, 1990). Members of collectivistic cultures are more concerned with avoiding hurting others and imposing on them than are members of individualistic cultures. Members of individualistic cultures are concerned more with clarity in conversations (Kim, 1994) and view clarity as necessary for effective communication (Kim & Wilson, 1994) more than members of collectivistic cultures. Members of individualistic cultures perceive direct requests as the most effective strategy for accomplishing their goals, while members of collective cultures perceive direct requests as least effective (Kim & Wilson, 1994).

Cultural individualism-collectivism has a direct influence on communicative style. For instance, low and high-context communication is the predominant forms of communication in individualistic and collectivistic cultures, respectively (Gudykunst et al., 1988). The individualists tend to use low-context communication i.e. as being direct, explicit, open and precise. They are also more concerned with clarity in conversation (Kim, 1994 cited in Gudykunst, 1998) and view clarity as necessary for effective communication. In addition, they also perceive directness as the most effective strategy for accomplishing their goals and use categorical words such as certainly, absolutely and positively.



The collectivists, on the other hand, tend to employ high-context communication and communicate in ways that maintain harmony in their in-groups (Hall, 1976). In other words, they communicate in an indirect fashion. This form of communication is expressed through the use of qualifiers such as *maybe*, *perhaps* and *probably* in conversations. Qualifier words are used to avoid leaving an assertive impression with the listener.

According to Hall (1976), a high-context (HC) communication or message is 'one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context (LC) is just the opposite, i.e. the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code' (Hall, 1976, p. 79). Hall sees context as a continuum, with high context (HC) on one end and low context (LC) on the other.

One's communication style is dependent upon the degree to which one has internalized the values of the culture in which one is socialized, and the way one's culture socializes people to see themselves as in individualists or collectivists.

### **Beliefs about Talk**

Belief about talk refers to evaluations of the functions of talk and silence (Wiemann, Chen & Giles, 1986 cited in Gudykunst, 1998). There are diverse beliefs about talk that we can hold. Some see talk as more important than silence. The differences in beliefs about talk can be explained by cultural differences in individualism-collectivism. Individualists work hard to be accepted to the many groups they belong. Hence, they often tend to speak more, try to control the situation verbally and do not value silence. The collectivists generally already are members of a few groups. Thus, they do not have to go all out to be accepted. Silence, one belief about talk, is an important part of communication. Many people in individualistic cultures have a low tolerance for silence while silence is viewed as an important part of communication for members in collectivistic cultures.

### Direct-Indirect communication

Direct communication (Grice, 1979, manner maxim) involves transmitting verbal messages that 'embody and invoke speakers' true intentions,' while indirect communication involves transmitting verbal messages that 'camouflage and conceal speaker's true intentions' (Gudykunst et al., 1996). Indirect communication emphasizes listeners' abilities to infer speakers' intentions, whereas direct communication emphasizes speakers' ability to express their intentions. Gudykunst (1998) claims that to assert oneself as a unique person (individualism), one must be direct so that others will know where he or she stands.

Indirect communication, according to Gudykunst (1998), is often used in intimate relationships. If our goal is to maintain harmony in the in-group (collectivism), we cannot be direct because we might offend another member of the in-group. To maintain harmony, collectivists need to be cautious and indirect. Indirect communication, therefore, predominates in collectivistic cultures whenever maintaining harmony is important. When maintaining harmony is not a primary concern, collectivists often use direct communication.



### Theoretical Framework and Methodology

For the purpose of this paper, Hofstede's (1991) individualism-collectivism cultural variability was used as a guide as it provides a powerful explanatory framework for understanding cultural differences in intercultural communication. There are cultural differences that predominate in individualistic and collectivistic cultures in the communication process. For example, it may be said that traditionally both Indian and Chinese cultures would tend to be oriented to collectivism, it would be still pertinent to investigate whether this is really the case among young adults in today's dynamic global world. However, an analysis on cultural variability alone is inadequate to identify the communicative styles of the students concerned. Hence, Gudykunst's anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory is also applied to analyze the communicative style of these Chinese and Indian students.

Gudykunst (1998) states that the management of anxiety and uncertainty is the basic cause in influencing effective communication. Combining both Hofstede's cultural variability and Gudykunst's AUM theory provides an adequate framework to analyze the communicative style of the Chinese and Indian students of a Malaysian secondary national type (Chinese) school. The theory presented performs valuable functions in the pursuit of understanding the dynamics involved in the students' communicative style.

In conducting this case study, the support of 20 student volunteers (10 Chinese-5 male and 5 female, 10 Indians – 5 male and 5 female) from a secondary national type (Chinese) school in Perak, Malaysia was enlisted. They were 19-20 years of age and were in Form Upper Six at school. They were required to respond to a questionnaire that assesses the students' cultural variable orientation (individualists-collectivists), uncertainty (cognitive) and anxiety (affective) management and two selected aspects of communication (beliefs about talk and direct indirect communication). The questionnaire is taken from Gudykunst's (1998) and Stephan and Stephan (1985) (cited in Gudykunst, 1998) assessment table (See Appendix). This assessment requires a score count to determine the students' level of cultural orientation, anxiety-uncertainty management and their use of language. Based on these scores, a comparison of individualist-collectivist orientation (i.e. the major cultural dimension) is made between the Chinese and Indian students. The next step is to identify the connection between the cultural dimensions, anxiety-uncertainty management and the two selected aspects of low and high context communication, based on the data collected. Finally, an analysis of how these orientations influence the Malaysian Chinese and Indian students' use of language or communicative style is made with reference to the data collected.

### Research Findings and Discussion

Based on the data collected, it was identified that 50% (or five persons) of the Chinese students displayed individualistic orientation whereas 30% (or three persons) of the Indian students have similar individualistic orientation. For those who were of collectivistic orientation, it was found that 40% (or four persons) of the Chinese students are so oriented as compared to 20% (or two persons) for the Indians. Interestingly enough, 20% (or two persons) scored equally on both the individualistic and collectivistic orientation ranking. One person or 10% of the Chinese students appeared to possess equal individualistic and collectivistic orientation, similar to that possessed by an Indian student (or 10%). The information is tabulated below.



**Table 1: Cultural Orientation of Chinese and Indians**

Ethnic Group	Sex	Individualistic	Collectivistic	Neutral
Chinese	Male	4(40%)	-	1(10%)
Chinese	Female	1(10%)	4(40%)	-
Indian	Male	1(10%)	4(40%)	-
Indian	Female	2(20%)	2(20%)	1(10%)

Comparing the Chinese and Indian students, it is noted that based on the questionnaire, there are more collectivists among the Indian students (six persons or 60%) but an almost equal distribution of individualists (five persons or 50%) and collectivists (four persons or 40%) among the Chinese students. According to Samovar and Porter (2001), the Chinese culture is distinctively collectivist and according to Hofstede (1991), the Indian culture ranges from collectivist to semi-collectivist. The findings in this paper suggest that this is not always necessarily so. There is a possibility that these students who are members of the collectivistic culture may have learnt some individualistic values and interdependent self-constructs which explains their individualistic orientation although their ethnicity is generally associated with collectivistic orientation.

In addition, gender is another consideration. The Chinese boys appear to be more individualistic than the Chinese girls while the Indian boys seem more collectivistic but there is an equal distribution of collectivists and individualists among the Indian girls. This demonstrates that there appears to be individualists in this group of students normally associated with a collectivistic society.

The following section identifies the relationship between the cultural dimensions and the two selected aspects of language use. The scores from the questionnaire show that some of these students could have very high individualistic or very high collectivistic orientation or very low high individualistic or very low collectivistic orientation. However for the purposes of this paper, the students were grouped into two categories, based on the data collected:

- individualistic Chinese and individualistic Indians
- collectivistic Chinese and collectivistic Indians

#### **Individualistic Chinese and Indians**

Based on the data, in this category 50% (or five persons) of the Chinese students and 30% (or three persons) of the Indian students were perceived to possess individualistic orientation.

**Table 2: Uncertainty and anxiety dimensions and language use of individualistic Chinese and Indians**

	Uncertainty			Anxiety			Belief About Talks			Direct Communication		
	H	M	L	H	M	L	H	M	L	H	M	L
IC	-	5(50%)	-	4(40%)	1(10%)	-	2(20%)	3(30%)	-	2(20%)	3(30%)	-
II	1(10%)	1(10%)	1(10%)	3(30%)	-	-	2(20%)	1(10%)	-	2(20%)	1(10%)	-

KEY:

- IC : Individualistic Chinese  
 II : Individualistic Indians  
 H : High  
 M : Moderate  
 L : Low



### Uncertainty and Anxiety

Based on Table 2 above, we can see that all the Chinese students displayed moderate uncertainty level, while 10% (or one person) of the Indians had high uncertainty level, 10% (or one person) moderate uncertainty level and another 10% (or one person) low uncertainty level.

The findings on the affective factor reveal that a total of 40% (or four persons) of Chinese students and 30% (or three persons) of the Indian students demonstrate high level of anxiety. One Chinese individualist (or 1 person) possesses moderate level of anxiety. High level of anxiety indicates lack of affective factor control. The less powerful interactants feel in a situation, the more anxious they will be and more intrusive thought would be experienced which would decrease the cognitive capacity that is their uncertainty level (Gudykunst, 1998). With reference to Gudykunst's AUM theory (cited in Wiseman, 1995), individualists are known to possess low anxiety level. The data however, reveals that the individualists from both the ethnic groups possess high anxiety level.

### Beliefs About Talk

Looking at the data, 20% (or two persons) of the Chinese individualists have high beliefs about talk, 30% (or three persons) have moderate beliefs about talk while 20% (or two persons) of the Indian students have high beliefs about talk and 10% (or one person) have moderate beliefs about talk.

#### Direct and indirect communication

The finding on the aspect of language use is similar to beliefs about talk among the Chinese and the Indian individualists. A total of 20% (or two persons) of the Chinese individualists employ direct use of communication and 30% (or three persons) employ moderate use of direct-indirect communication. Among the individualistic Indians, 20% (or two persons) employ direct use of communication and 10% (or one person) employ moderate use of direct-indirect use of language.

### Relationship between the major cultural dimension, uncertainty-anxiety management and two selected aspects of language use

According to Gudykunst (1998), individualists are supposed to have low uncertainty level. The findings, on the contrary, show that 5% (or five persons) of the Chinese students have moderate uncertainty level while 10% (or one person) of the Indian students range from high to low respectively. This data also reveals that this group of Chinese and Indian students although individualists, do not conform to the characteristics of individualists orientation.

On the cognitive and affective factors, the data shows that the Chinese individualists have moderate control of uncertainty level but possess a high anxiety level. For the Indian students, they vary in their uncertainty level but display high anxiety level. According to the AUM theory, individualists are supposed to have low uncertainty and anxiety level. The data reveal that both the ethnic groups' uncertainty level and anxiety level do not reciprocate and thus contradicts the AUM theory.

According to the AUM theory, having low uncertainty and anxiety level means the individualists are able to control their cognitive and affective factors which influence language use or communication. In other words, individualists with low uncertainty and anxiety level are supposed to have high beliefs about talk and employ a high direct use of language. The data reveals that there are more Chinese individualists or 30% (or three persons) with moderate levels on beliefs about talk while more Indian individualists or 20% (or two persons) display high levels on beliefs about talk. In other words, there is more moderate level scoring on beliefs about talk among the Chinese individualists which contradicts the AUM theory that claims that individualists are supposed to have high beliefs about talks.



Although these individualists tend to contradict the individualism-collectivism and AUM theories, having moderate levels on beliefs in talk and moderate use of direct-indirect communication are desirable because they help interactants to use an appropriate communicative style (Gudykunst, 1998).

Generally the data reveals that cultural orientation cannot be used as a tool to measure the uncertainty and anxiety level because the individualists of both the ethnic groups may not share similar characteristics although they may appear to possess similar orientation. It is also noticed that the uncertainty and anxiety factors do not correspond with each other. However, it is noticed that these two factors do influence, to a certain extent, the two selected aspects of communication, that is 20% (or two persons) from each ethnic group have high level of beliefs about talk and employ a high use of direct communication.

#### Collectivistic Chinese and Indians

In this category 40% of the Chinese (or four persons) and 60% (or six persons) of the Indians were found to be collectivistic, based on the data findings.

**Table 3: Uncertainty and anxiety level and language use of collectivistic Chinese and Indians**

	Uncertainty			Anxiety			Belief About Talks			Direct Communication		
	H	M	L	H	M	L	H	M	L	H	M	L
CC	-	4(40%)	-	3(30%)	1(10%)	-	3(30%)	1(10%)	-	-	4(40%)	-
CI	1(10%)	5(50%)	-	5(50%)	1(10%)	-	2(20%)	4(40%)	-	1(10%)	5(50%)	-

#### KEY:

- CC : Collectivistic Chinese
- CI : Collectivistic Indian
- H : High
- M : Moderate
- L : Low

#### Uncertainty and Anxiety

Based on table 3 above, it can be discerned that 40% (or four persons) Chinese collectivists appear to have moderate level of uncertainty. There are 50% (or five persons) Indian collectivists who display a moderate level of uncertainty while 10% (or one person) show a high level of uncertainty.

Further, 30% (or 3 persons) of Chinese collectivists have high level of anxiety while 10 (or 1 person) has moderate level of anxiety. Among the Indian collectivists, 50% (or 5 persons) have high level of anxiety while 10% (or 1 person) has moderate level of anxiety.

#### Beliefs About Talks

The data findings indicate that 30% (or three persons) of the Chinese collectivists have high level of beliefs about talk and 10% (or one person) have moderate level of beliefs about talk. 20% (or two persons) the Indian collectivists on the other hand have high level of beliefs about talks and 40% (or four persons) have moderate level of beliefs about talks.

#### Direct and indirect communication

It is noted that 40% (or four persons) of the Chinese collectivists responded they would prefer a moderate use of direct communication while 50% (or five persons) of the Indian collectivists prefer a moderate use of direct communication and 10% (or one person) employ high use of direct communication.



### Relationship between the major cultural dimension, uncertainty-anxiety management and two selected aspects of language use

The collectivists, according to AUM theory are supposed to have high level of uncertainty and anxiety. The data reveals that the collectivists generally demonstrate a moderate level of uncertainty but high level of anxiety. For instance, 30% (or three persons) of Chinese collectivists demonstrate a high level of anxiety and 10% (or one person) a moderate level of anxiety while 50% (or five persons) of the Indian collectivists responded to possessing a high level of anxiety and 10% (or one person) a moderate level of anxiety. This indicates that the uncertainty and anxiety factors for this group of students do not correspond with each other.

A total of 30% (or three persons) of the Chinese collectivists appear to have high level of beliefs about talk and employ a moderate use of direct-indirect communication. What is interesting is that, collectivists are supposed to display high uncertainty and anxiety level, low belief about talks and less use of direct communication. The data reveals that this is not true of the case for the high collectivistic Chinese students.

For the Indian students, it was found that 50% (or five persons) display moderate uncertainty but high anxiety. For these students the cognitive factor reveals that they are able to reduce their uncertainties while the affective factors indicate that being collectivists they naturally tend to have a high level of anxiety as claimed by the AUM theory. Having high anxiety level reflects the collectivistic orientation but with respect to the selected aspects of communication, these students tend to have moderate beliefs about talk and moderate use of direct communication. Although being collectivistic this group of students is able to employ talk and silence as well as direct and indirect communication moderately. It is discerned that both the individualist and collectivist Chinese students and the Indian students are able to manage their uncertainty factors well but tend have very high anxiety levels. To restate this, the anxiety factor does not correspond with the uncertainty factor and this contradicts the AUM theory. Uncertainty and anxiety are factors that correlate but this does not appear to be the case for these students.

Both the Chinese and Indian collectivists seem to have similar levels of the cognitive and affective factors (moderate uncertainty and high level of anxiety) as well as the two selected aspects of language use. According to AUM theory, high levels of uncertainty and anxiety encourage collectivists to have low beliefs about talk. In this study, it is found that both these groups of students differ on beliefs about talks as 30% (or three persons) of the Chinese students place high importance on beliefs about talk while 40% (or four persons) of the Indian students place moderate importance on beliefs about talk. This contradicts the claim made by Gudykunst (1998) that the Chinese believe in silence more than talk. Generally, it is agreed that the collectivists tend to be more silent as they do not need to go out of the way to be accepted unlike the individualists (Gudykunst, 1998). Some 30% (or three persons) of the Chinese students may tend to assert themselves in an interaction and may not tolerate silence while 10% (or one person) may adapt and accommodate himself or herself when to talk and when to be silent. Another 20% (or two persons) of the Indian students place high beliefs about talk while 10% (or one person) of the Chinese collectivist place moderate importance on beliefs about talk. This shows that for the Indian students, talk is important and enjoyable and they may engage in small talk or gossip (Gudykunst, 1998). Besides, it may indicate that they do not tolerate silence but may speak more to control the communicative event.

According to AUM theory, high levels of uncertainty and anxiety encourage collectivists to use less direct communication. The data reveals that 40% (or four persons) of the Chinese students and 50% (or five persons) Indian students tend to employ moderation in the direct-indirect use of language. According to Gudykunst, 1998, this is desirable for effective communication as one is able to determine when to assert oneself as a unique person (individualism) or when one wants to maintain harmony (collectivism).



For the collectivists, their cultural orientation too cannot be used as a tool to measure the uncertainty and anxiety level. The students' cognitive and affective factors too do not correlate and they do not influence the two selected aspects of language use, as the characteristics do not match.

#### **Influence of cultural individualism-collectivism on communicative style**

The individualists are known to be affect oriented and are more inclined to talk compared to members of collectivistic cultures. Therefore, they are motivated to communicate interpersonally to achieve affection, pleasure, and inclusion more than members of collectivistic cultures. The data reveals that 20% (or two persons) of the Chinese individualists believe talk as highly important and another 30% (or three persons) hold a moderate belief about talk. For the Indian individualists, 20% (or 2 persons) demonstrate a high belief about talk and another 10% (or one person) has a moderate belief about talk. It is possible that the Chinese individualists are more inclined to be silent compared to the Indian students. This seems to reflect Gudykunst's (1998), claim that the Chinese do not see talk as more important and enjoyable but see silence as a control strategy in an interaction. However, individualists are supposed to have high beliefs about talk as they have to work hard to be accepted to the many groups they belong to. This also serves as evidence where the cultural orientation does not directly influence their communicative style. In addition, the data for both the selected aspects of language use does not correspond with the individualistic orientation rigidly. This proves that cultural level tendencies alone do not influence communicative style. Collectivists, on the contrary, are known to pay more attention to others' behaviour than do members of individualistic cultures (Gudykunst et al., 1996). Hence, they are more concerned with avoiding hurting others and imposing on them. Referring back to Table 3, 40% (or four persons) of the Chinese collectivistic students employed moderate use of direct-indirect language (low-context communication while 10% (or one person) of the Indian collectivistic students employed high use of direct-indirect language (low-context communication) and another 50% (or five persons) employed moderate use of direct-indirect language (low-high context communication). This data shows that there are more collectivistic Indian students who employ moderate use of direct-indirect language (low-high context communication) compared to their Chinese counterparts. This finding contradicts Varner's and Beamer's claim (1995) that the Chinese tend to follow a general to specific sequence when approaching any communication task. The Chinese are considered to be of high-context culture and their priority is supposed to be keeping harmony, preventing anyone from losing face and nurturing the relationship. However, this group of students is rather direct and if they were to communicate with other members of their group or other groups, there is room for miscommunication to occur. For the Indian students, they probably perceive directness as the least effective strategy for accomplishing their goals and thus employ indirectness strategy. There is a possibility that the use of direct communication depends on their relationship with the person with whom they are communicating.

It is also noticed that the cultural orientation differs in terms of degree. Being individualistic or collectivistic does not indicate that a person would have a particular communicative style because there are other related factors that influence the way a person interacts.

To conclude this section, the questionnaire analysis reveals that both the Chinese and Indian girls placed a high importance on beliefs about talk. They valued it as more important and enjoyable than did the Chinese and Indian boys. When both these groups that is the boys and the girls were to communicate, there is a possibility of misunderstanding in communication, as both groups would probably employ different communicative styles and strategies to get their messages across.



It is acknowledged that a study which includes factors such as personality orientation, individual values and self-constructs that influence one's orientation and tendencies would provide more information. Further, observations in actual interactions would also be useful to confirm the perceptions.

### Conclusion

Generally, the Chinese and Indian participants in this study have a moderate orientation in cultural differences and communication. Individualistic or collectivistic orientation was not reflected rigidly as the participants tended to have different orientation for different aspects. Thus, being moderate may facilitate these groups of students or young adults to communicate effectively as well as to employ appropriate communicative style without much difficulty. However, it is recognized that not all participants of collectivist cultures exhibit what is said to be their culture's tendencies, as some participants were highly individualistic and tended to have individualistic orientation. While it is acknowledged that this is a case study, we believe that personal experiences in society would support the findings. This study also demonstrates that the dimension of cultural variability can be used to explain the similarities and differences in communication across cultures. It also reinforces that the individualism-collectivism dimension cannot be treated as a dichotomy but rather it is a continuum and that while individualism and collectivism exist in all cultures, one or the other tends to predominate in different spheres of life.

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## APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

**1. Assessing Your Individualistic and Collectivistic Tendencies**

The purpose of this questionnaire is to help you assess your individualistic and collectivistic tendencies. Respond by indicating the degree to which the values reflected in each phrase is important to you. "Opposed to my values" (answer 1), "Not important to me" (answer 2), "somewhat important to me" (answer 3), "Important to me" (answer 4), or "Very Important to me" (answer 5).

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Obtaining pleasure or sensuous gratification.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Preserving the welfare of others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Being successful by demonstrating my individual competency.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Restraining my behaviour if it is going to harm others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Being independent in thought and action.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Having safety and stability for people with whom I identify.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Obtaining status and prestige.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Having harmony in my relations with others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Having an exciting and challenging life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Accepting cultural and religious traditions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Being recognized for my individual work.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Conforming to social norms.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Being self-directed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. Being benevolent (kind to others).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Having power.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. Being polite to others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. Being ambitious.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. Being self-controlled.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. Being able to choose what I do.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. Enhancing the welfare of others.

To find your individualism score, add your responses to the odd numbered items. To find your collectivism score add your responses to the even numbered items. Both scores will range from 10 to 50. The higher your scores, the more individualistic and / or collectivistic you are.

NOTE:\* Adapted from Rokeach (1972) and Schwartz (1990) cited in Gudykunst, 1987, p. 67

**2. Assessing Your Uncertainty**

The purpose of this questionnaire is to help you assess the amount of uncertainty you generally experience when you communicate with strangers. (NOTE: You can determine the amount of uncertainty you experience communicating with a specific person by substituting the person's name for "strangers" in each of the statements.) Respond to each statement indicating the degree to which the statements are applicable when you interact with strangers. If you "Never" have the experience, answer 1 in the space provided; if you "Almost Never" have the experience, answer 2; if you "Sometimes" have the experience and sometimes do not answer 3; if you "Almost Always" have the experience, answer 4; if you "Always" have the experience, answer 5.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I am not confident when I communicate with strangers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I can interpret strangers' behaviours when we communicate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I am indecisive when I communicate with strangers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I can explain strangers' behaviours when we communicate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I am not able to understand strangers when we communicate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I know what to do when I communicate with strangers.



- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I am uncertain how to behave when I communicate with strangers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I can comprehend strangers' behaviours when we communicate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I am not able to predict strangers' behaviours when we communicate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I know what to expect from strangers' behaviours when we communicate.

To find your scores, first reverse the responses for the even numbered items (i.e. if you wrote 1, make it 5; if you wrote 2, make it 4; if you wrote 3, leave it as 3; if you wrote 4, make it 2; if you wrote 5, make it 1). Next, add the numbers next to each of the items. Scores range from 10 to 50. The higher your score, the more uncertainty you experience when interacting with strangers.

NOTE:\* Adapted from Stephen & Stephen (1985) cited in Gudykunst, 1987, p. 21

### 3. Assessing Your Anxiety

The purpose of this questionnaire is to help you assess the amount of general anxiety you experience when you communicate with strangers. (NOTE: You can determine the amount of anxiety you experience communicating with a specific person by substituting the person's name for "strangers" in each of the statements.) Respond to each statement indicating the degree to which the statements are applicable when you interact with strangers. If you "Never" have the experience, answer 1 in the space provided; if you "Almost Never" have the experience, answer 2; if you "Sometimes" have the experience and sometimes do not answer 3; if you "Almost Always" have the experience, answer 4; if you "Always" have the experience, answer 5.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I feel calm when I communicate with strangers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I get frustrated when I communicate with strangers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I do not get ruffled when I communicate with strangers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I am insecure when I communicate with strangers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I feel composed when I communicate with strangers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I feel anxious when I communicate with strangers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I do not get excited when I have to communicate with strangers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I feel stress when I communicate with strangers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I feel relaxed when I communicate with strangers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I am worried when I communicate with strangers.

To find your scores, first reverse the responses for the odd numbered items (i.e. if you wrote 1, make it 5; if you wrote 2, make it 4; if you wrote 3, leave it as 3; if you wrote 4, make it 2; if you wrote 5, make it 1). Next, add the numbers next to each of the items. Scores range from 10 to 50. The higher your score, the more anxiety you experience when interacting with strangers.

NOTE:\* Adapted from Stephen & Stephen (1985) cited in Gudykunst, 1987, p. 25



**4. Assessing Your Belief About Talks**

The purpose of this questionnaire is to help you assess your beliefs about talk. Respond to each statement regarding the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statement. If you strongly disagree with the statement, answer 1; if you disagree, answer 2; if you neither agree nor disagree, answer 3; if you agree, answer 4, if you strongly agree, answer 5.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I enjoy talking when I find myself in social situations.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I do not enjoy small talk.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I try to break the ice by talking when I first meet others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I view people who are reticent positively.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I could talk for hours at a time.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I do not enjoy talking with others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I think that untalkative people are boring.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I do not trust the words people use when they talk.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I judge people by how well they speak.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I do not talk when I have nothing important to say.

To obtain your score, first reverse the answers you gave to the even numbered items (i.e, if you answered 1, make it a 5; if you answered 2, make it a 4; if you answered 3, leave it at a 3; if you answered 4, make it a 2; if you answered 5, make it a 1). Once you have reversed the even numbered items, add the responses for the items. Your score will range from 10 to 50. The higher your score, the more you value talk as a way of communicating.

NOTE:\* Adapted from Stephen & Stephen (1985) cited in Gudykunst, 1987, p. 176

**5. Assessing Your Direct and Indirect Communication Style**

The purpose of this questionnaire is to help you assess your tendency to be direct or indirect when you communicate. Respond to each statement regarding the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statement. If you strongly disagree with the statement, answer 1; if you disagree, answer 2; if you neither agree nor disagree, answer 3; if you agree, answer 4, if you strongly agree, answer 5.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I talk about something unrelated before I get to the related topic.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I can talk about personal information with most people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I am able to recognize subtle and indirect messages easily.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I often try to persuade others when I communicate with them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I qualify my language (e.g., use "maybe," "perhaps") when I communicate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I avoid ritualistic forms of communication when I talk with others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I focus on what others are not saying more than what they are saying when we communicate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I openly disagree with others when I communicate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I expect others to infer my opinion when we communicate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I am not ambiguous when I communicate with others.

To obtain your score, first reverse the answers you gave to the odd numbered items (i.e, if you answered 1, make it a 5; if you answered 2, make it a 4; if you answered 3, leave it at a 3; if you answered 4, make it a 2 if you answered 5, make it a 1. Once you have reversed the odd numbered items, add the responses for the items. Your score will range from 10 to 50. The higher your score, the more you are direct when you communicate; the lower your score, the more indirect you tend to be.

NOTE:\* Adapted from Gudykunst, 1998